

## **“Life’s Missing Ingredients—Part 1: Purpose”**

This is my brother, Mark **[PICTURE: Mark Brown]**. I love him to death. When he and I get together, look out world! Especially if we put our Bubba teeth in! Mark’s passion in life is cooking. He is one of the best and most creative cooks I’ve ever met. He loves doing it and if you have the pleasure of having him cook for you, you want him to do it again and again. I like watching him cook and being around him because I pick up pointers now and then. Yes, I like to cook too. Maybe you’ve heard of my famous tuna meringue pie.

Anyway, when I’m around Mark sometimes he’ll be cooking; the pots and pans will be everywhere, the air will be thick with delicious smells and as I watch him he’ll be tasting something. Occasionally he’ll have this look on his face that says that there’s something missing. Some ingredient needs to be added to this or that dish so that it’s just right. Just right. He won’t rest until he finds it, because that missing ingredient, whatever it is, is what completes the dish.

Well, we’re starting a series today called “Life’s Missing Ingredients.” We’re going to do some taste testing in our lives and in our hearts about what it is that might be missing in our lives. I’ll be drawing from some resources from the Willow Creek preaching team, but I’m also speaking from personal experience. Times when I’ve done some taste testing of my own life and realized that something was missing. This also comes from conversations that I have with many of you. When in one way or another, as you progress on this spiritual journey, you say, “Aaron, there’s something missing in my life. It’s not a house; I have one of those. It’s not something external; most of that’s in place. But there’s something missing in my life, and I need to find out what it is, and I want to address it.”

We’re going to look at several possible missing ingredients in this sermon series and the first possible missing ingredient that we’re going to talk about is a thing called “purpose”—a purpose for your life.

Back in the news big time right now is the book by Rick Warren called **[PICTURE: cover of *The Purpose Driven Life*]** *The Purpose Driven Life*. Second only to the Bible, *The Purpose Drive Life* was the best selling book in 2003 and 2004. And while there are a few critics of the book and Rick Warren, it’s popularity points to the fact that people are hungry to know their purpose. People are hungry to know that they exist for some reason. Ashley Smith **[PICTURES: Ashley Smith and Brian Nichols]** read from the book to the Brian Nichols, who’s accused of killing a judge and three others. He was holding Smith hostage and she read to him from what she’d read earlier that day. It seems that what she read to him about his life having purpose, even if that meant going to jail the rest of his life, touched something deep inside of him that led him to surrender to authorities. Something inside of us craves purpose. In fact, if we don’t know our purpose something in us begins to die.

During World War II, there were prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp in Hungary, that were forced to work in a factory. The allies came along, bombed that factory and blew it apart. So the prisoners had nothing to do. The Nazi soldiers had the prisoners take all the rubble and dirt of that factory and move it to another field. The next day, they had them take that same rubble and move it back in reverse. The next day, they had to take that stuff and move it back and day after day they had no meaning, no purpose. It was just work doing the same thing over and over with no meaning and no purpose. They were just moving dirt piles.

Then something strange began to happen. The prisoners began to go crazy. They began to lose their will to live because there was no meaning, no purpose in their work. They were just moving

bricks and dirt back and forth, back and forth. Many of them began to throw themselves in front of the guards trying to get shot. In essence, they were trying to commit suicide because death was preferable to living without meaning. Death was preferable to just moving dirt piles.

Human beings crave a sense of purpose in almost everything they do. In fact there's an entire book in the Old Testament devoted to the madness of moving dirt piles. It's the book of Ecclesiastes. It takes a cynical look at the madness of living life without a purpose.

The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes decides to go on a purpose expedition. He wants to find the meaning of his life. So he goes out and he accumulates money--tons of it. And after he accumulates all that money, he goes, "That didn't provide me with the meaning I was hoping for." So then he seeks to attain to power and becomes a very powerful person. Well, that didn't do it for him either. So then he engages in pleasure seeking--scandalous degrees of it. (Maybe that will motivate you to read the book this week!) But that doesn't do it for him. Then he goes after prestige, and that doesn't really satisfy him on the inside. At the end of all of this effort, he cries the famous words, "Vanity! Vanity! It's all vanity!" Or another translation says, **[SLIDE...]** **"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Eccl 1:14, NIV)**

. Or the metaphor we've been using: "It's like moving dirt piles from one side of the camp to the other, and then moving them back." It doesn't satisfy the human heart. We were meant for more than moving dirt piles or chasing the wind. But what is our purpose? Do you know? See if you hear your own response in some of these people...

### **[VIDEO: Visual Reality, Volume 6, "What is Your Purpose?" 3.5 min]**

It seems like, for a lot of us, living day by day, being happy, enjoying the moment is the purpose of our lives. I want to be clear on this: that's OK, if your 4 or 5 years old! But if you're older than that, it's time to find this missing ingredient. And it is missing for a lot of people. Yeah, we're busy, and a lot of people are working hard to achieve goals. But listen, achieving goals is not the same as working toward a purpose. Some goals can be purpose-oriented, but a lot of our goals are hollow and empty.

So, right now, do a gut-check. In your heart of hearts, do you know that there's an ingredient conspicuous by its absence in your life, and it's this very thing we're talking about today--a sense of purpose or meaning? Some of you have had a gnawing sense of discomfort about this. And it's growing as the months and years go by, because you feel like all you're doing is moving dirt piles from here to there, and it's no longer enough for you. Some of you are very young, and you're taking a glimpse down the road of the life and you're wondering, "If that's what the future holds, then I don't think I want it." Others of you are looking at retirement and you're worried thinking, "Right now I have work to go to every day, I may not like it, but it gives me a little sense of purpose, what happens when that's gone from my life? What purpose do I have then?"

So let's try and answer that. How do you find your purpose for your life? Or more specifically, where do you go to find your purpose? Now, in our society, for almost everybody, the knee-jerk answer is to say, "Well, you've got to look within. That's where you find your purpose." Let me illustrate it like this...[drawing a circle...]

This circle represents you, or me, any person. Our natural first response, when looking for purpose is to go to the most familiar place. And that's us—we go looking inside ourselves. But let me ask you, when you go looking for purpose inside what voice are you listening for? Who or what informs your self so that your self will make a good choice about the purpose for your life?

Let's push this for a minute. Think about this: There's like six billion people on the planet right now. What if everybody on the planet looked inside themselves for their purpose in life? In some ways that sounds good, but in other ways, that sounds very, very dangerous to me. I think a lot of times people get misguided because what's inside is often very selfish.

Last week I caught an episode of *Behind the Music* on VH1. It's a documentary that they do and they look at different bands or people and tell what it was or is like behind the scenes of their lives. This particular episode was about the 80's heavy metal group Metallica. Here's what the VH1 website said about this episode... **[PICTURE: Metallica]** *"For Metallica, hard rock meant playing hard, on-stage and off. Their drinking became the stuff of legend, and the rock press dubbed them 'Alcoholica.' Amid the mayhem, the most popular heavy metal band in the world endured its share of hardship and tragedy, including the death of bassist Cliff Burton and an on-stage accident in which Hetfield suffered serious second and third degree burns. "Metallica: Behind The Music" charts their rise from garage band to global stadium phenomenon, always on their own terms."*

Now I'm not picking on them, I just happened to see part of this episode, but what was true of them is the theme in so many lives, of actors, professional athletes and so on. When they go looking for meaning on the inside they find a very selfish purpose. And that purpose is usually pleasure.

But here's the pattern that unfolds in the stories. In almost every case they wind up drinking more than they should drink, doing more drugs than human being can tolerate. They marry and divorce a half a dozen times. They wreck two or three sets of kids. They alienate themselves from family or friends. They wind up losing their contract or their job, or get kicked out of the band or off the team, and then someday they sit all alone in rehab. They say to themselves, "Maybe I should have looked somewhere else than just inside myself."

Now, when people look inside themselves to find their purpose it doesn't always degenerate into that. But I know the darkness inside me. I know that selfishness that's in there. When I look for purpose, I can't look inside myself. I have to look outside the circle. And that's what the ancient wisdom of the Bible teaches us. That we are created beings, and that the Creator made each human being with a purpose, so we look outside ourselves to our creator in order to know our purpose.

Let's take this deeper. [Drawing another circle] This is planet Earth, and in case you haven't noticed it's broken very badly. It really is. There's all kinds of garbage going on on this planet. There's violence, war, poverty, greed, racism, hunger, homelessness, everyone is at each other's throats. People seem to be working at cross purposes with each other in this world. And it's messing things up. But the Bible teaches this from cover to cover: God is a purposeful being. And God's purpose is to restore, fix, redeem and reclaim this broken world.

God is not just hanging around in heaven all self-absorbed, soaking up angelic worship, listening to music that's all about himself! The Bible teaches that we have a God with work gloves on. We have a God with sleeves rolled up. We have a God on a mission, and the mission is to straighten out this mess.

God is redeeming people in this world who call out for redemption. He's doing a work of restoration in individual's lives. He's giving hope. He's rebuilding broken lives and dreams. He's at work 24/7 all over this globe, trying to reclaim and redeem and restore this broken planet. This God on this mission, doing this purpose, fixing this broken world right now is reaching out a hand to you, saying, "I'd like to invite you to join me in my purpose, in my mission of straightening out this mess."

The God of the universe has his hand outstretched to you, saying, "You can keep moving dirt piles the rest of your life if you're into excavation. You can keep doing that, or you can join me and we'll change the world." How much purpose do you want in your life? How much meaning do you

want? What would it be like to be able to lay your head on the pillow at night and say, “You know what I did today? I teamed up with God to change the world.”

For most people it’s a mind blower that our great God would carve out a niche, a role, that would fit your personality, your experience, your gifting, your brainpower. And when you get connected with God, and you start living with a worthwhile purpose at the center of you life, it’s one of the most powerful experiences a human being go through.

One of the great things about what I do is that I get to see what can happen to an ordinary man, woman, or young person when all of a sudden they realize that God has given them a personal invitation and an individual role. They exchange a lifetime of rearranging dirt piles for the privilege of teaming up with him to change the world. I’ve seen what happens inside a human heart when people grab a hold of that. Getting up in the morning feels a lot different to a person who has that kind of purpose. Having that kind of purpose at the center of a human life changes the way you think, act, relate, spend time and money. It changes the way you view your talents and your skills. It changes how you invest your free time. And it changes how you feel when you lay your head on the pillow at night. You say, “God and I did something today, and it mattered.”

I want you to get this so badly! You were meant for doing more than moving dirt piles. You were. And it’s never too late to figure out what your purpose--what God’s purpose is that he’s asking you to do as he’s attempting to change the world--it’s never too late to figure out what your purpose is.

Let’s take a look at Acts 13:36. This is about the Old Testament character, David. He’s referenced in the New Testament this way in Acts 13:36: **[SLIDE...]** **“David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died...” (Acts 13:36, NRSV).** I love the clarity of that single sentence! It says, “Here’s all you really need to know about this guy called David. He didn’t waste much time moving dirt piles. He looked outside the circle of himself to find the purpose of his life. God gave it to him. He pursued it single-mindedly. He died knowing that his one-and-only life served its absolute highest purpose. He served the purpose for which God had created him in his life.

Wouldn’t you love having that verse written about you? **[NAME NAMES]** Wouldn’t it be something if it could be said about you, “Well, Fred served the purposes of God in his life. That’s what he did. And every time his head hit the pillow, he knew that his life counted.”

Now, some of you in this church, you’ve already looked beyond the circle of yourself, and you know what your purpose is in the grand scheme of things. I was talking to Teddy Steen this week. She is a woman with a purpose! She’s a recovering alcoholic and she knows that her purpose is to do something by God’s leading to help others that battle drug and alcohol addictions. She has a good career, but she knows that her real purpose goes beyond that.

If you already know what your purpose is here’s what I want to say to you as we start this new series: Serve the purposes of God with all your heart. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love people radically and selflessly. Listen to promptings as God guides you in your purpose along the way this year, and obey them regardless of what they cost. Display Christian character even when no one is looking. Take every opportunity to show compassion to the poor. You’re carrying out God’s purpose in fixing this broken world when you show compassion to anyone in need, when you reach out. You shake hands one time with someone of color, you reach across any divide in the name of Jesus, and you’re serving your purpose in fixing this broken world. You’re doing your little part. So for those of you who have clarity already, go for it, be released, serve the purposes of God with all your heart!

For those of you who are a little fuzzy about this purpose thing yet, I have good news and bad news. I'll give you the bad news first. The bad news is if you don't have your purpose clarified yet, there's going to be this sense of something missing in your life until you get it sorted out. You can mask it with alcohol and materialism and pleasure seeking. You can cover it over for a while, but it's always going to bubble back up. And you're always going to look at the ceiling at night, going, "I think I'm just moving dirt piles." So the bad news is you're never going to feel like your life is like it ought to be until you sort this out. But the good news is God will help you sort it out if you show willingness on your part.

The very first step, if you haven't done it already, is make a commitment to Jesus Christ unashamedly, uncompromisingly. If you haven't already, open up your heart to Jesus Christ and ask him to be your Forgiver and your Redeemer and your Friend and your Guide for this life. Just go on record. Make today the day. Open up your heart to Christ. You can do so with a single prayer.

If you've already done that, keep surrendering more of yourself, saying, "God, I'm open to you showing me what my purpose is in joining you in changing this world. I'm open. Show me the way." And then as he prompts you, step out a little bit and try your hand at something. Volunteer a little here, a little there. It's in gradual forms of serving that you usually begin to discover what you're good at and what your heart beats fast for. And then you head a little more in that direction or you head a little bit in another direction, and pretty soon you're finding that role and that niche. And it usually doesn't happen in a couple weeks or a couple months. It takes time. But if you're really willing and you're moving in this direction, there will come a day--I've had it in my life--when you're doing exactly what God kind of carved out for you to do in this grand purposeful thing. And while you're doing it, this thought will come to you: "I was born for this. This is why I'm here. At this moment I'm doing what God put me on the planet to do." And that's about as good as it gets. To be about the grand purpose with God, doing what he carved out for you to do in his power, in his strength, for his glory, with eternal implications, that's as good as it gets. And it's available to every one of you.

Sometimes, one of life's missing ingredients is purpose. But there's something you can do about that. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Bill Hybels, lead pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, for his resources for this series of sermons.*